

MANAGEMENT INTENSITY, THE KEY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN PROTECTED AREAS: DIAGNOSIS OF PROTECTED AREAS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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Central America's ecological wealth and diversity have meant that it has been able to offer innovative tourist products based on the singularity of the natural resources which are tucked away in its protected areas. This has given it a globally competitive position as a destination for ecotourism.

Since the end of the 1960s to the present day, Central America has gone from having 25 protected areas to more than 500, which represent about 25-26% of the region's territory. However, although the region has advanced a lot in terms of protective measures, the increase in recent years in the number of registered protected areas has not been accompanied by improved efficiency in managing the conservation of these natural areas. Furthermore, the future of many of these protected areas is threatened, the situation being made worse, in many cases, by increased numbers of visitors.

Ecotourism is a very complex activity. Thus, it needs to be developed in the most ordered manner possible, whilst trying to reduce all those factors which can have a negative effect on it and for this reason planning is necessary. One of the principal and necessary strategies for developing ecotourism in a sustainable way is to ensure that the protected areas which support it are managed effectively, while respecting a series of steps and mechanisms which will guarantee conservation and make tourism compatible with the preservation of resources. A protected area is actively managed when it has an approved management plan which includes diagnosing problems and provides the proactive means of resolving these problems and, where they exist, managing human (personnel), budget and administrative resources (Pons, 2006,1). Active management (involving a budget, a management plan and personnel) would be ideal for most of these protected areas (EUROPARC, 2002, 97).

The principal aim of this article is to evaluate the capacity and intensity of management of protected areas in Central America and to analyze to what extent planning instruments

have been developed by examining aspects such as the extent to which management plans for the region's protected areas have been developed; the availability of resources (personnel, money, infrastructure) and the involvement and support of the local community, landowners and other social groups in the management of these protected areas. We will also look at those programmes and projects which are currently active and which seek to improve management of the protected areas, although we think it necessary first to briefly review the antecedents which justify the origin and creation of the region's protected areas and to describe the principal characteristics which define them in order to be able find out how prepared and suitable these countries' protected areas are to be offered as resources for tourism.

The Sistema Centroamericano de Áreas Protegidas, or SICAP, (Central American System for Protected Areas) is made up of all the protected wild areas which the seven countries of the region have established in their respective Sistemas Nacionales de Áreas Protegidas, or SINAP (National Systems for Protected Areas). This includes 570 recognized protected areas along with more than 390 proposed new areas, making a total of more than 960 protected areas. The majority of the region's protected areas, more than 63%, are categorized as "low level protection" areas, while the rest are categorized as, for example, Reserva Natural Estricta (Highly Protected Natural Reserve), Parque Nacional (National Park) and Monumento Natural (Natural Monument). The SICAP has a large number of different categories, a fact which makes it difficult to determine how well management objectives correspond to the characteristics of the protected areas.

In addition to having some basic conservation and preservation measures within a strict environmental legislative framework, protected areas must also have a management plan. This must be a tool which not only guarantees the conservation and protection of resources, but which also monitors and regulates tourism, evaluates regulations, and provides instruments for regulating activities, installations and equipment. The plan must also monitor the behaviour and conduct of visitors, provide for environmental education (an element which distinguishes this form of tourism from others and which is rarely taken into account), study and evaluate the impact of tourism, monitor tourism etc. According to recent data only 18% of the declared Central American protected areas have a management plan.

The problems affecting the majority of the region's protected areas are due to the State not making enough economic resources available. Although funding is principally provided from national budgets, during the last decade cooperation between international organizations and the contribution from tourism have become increasingly important. By allowing tourism, protected areas create another mechanism for bringing money in, although at this precise moment, ecotourism has not yet made these areas economically self supporting. In Central American protected areas, entry charges are one such mechanism, but this is characterized by scant regulation and lack of regional consensus. This often creates conflicts because prices often do not match the services provided. One example of this is Nicaragua, where there is no legal mechanism for establishing taxes, tariffs, concessions or other types of income generated from visitors or from the use of protected areas. This situation is made worse by the type of land tenure in these areas which on the whole is private, limiting the State to charging per visit.

However, paying to visit a protected space is not the only possible mechanism, since there are others which are not as widespread or as regulated but which are very efficient,

such as offering food services, concessions to tourist businesses, transport, equipment hire, information services, leisure activities, parking facilities, etc.

Linked to the lack of funding is the lack of infrastructure and equipment and the fact that what exists is not maintained very well. Almost 60% of the protected areas of the region have no infrastructure. The lack of human resources is also a widespread problem and is common to all the areas of the region. It is crucial that areas which will be used for tourism are given the necessary infrastructures not only to meet and satisfy visitors' needs, but also to minimize the impact of tourism. These infrastructures help the areas to compete for visitors because they help to attract, regulate, distribute and concentrate them.

Protected areas either must depend exclusively on public funding or they must allow tourism, therefore, in order to get round this they need the support of local administrations and the participation of the public. In fact, this is already happening in many of the region's protected areas, where in the face of incompetence on the part of those responsible for administering the respective systems of protected areas, there have been in recent years co-administrative or co-management agreements between private businesses, NGOs or institutions. In other places management of protected areas has been decentralized to the town halls.

Although many advances have been made in generating participatory management of protected areas, this method of co-administration often lacks legal support, as is the case in Costa Rica, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras. Furthermore, and even more critically, local organizations are only involved in a small part of this co-administration.

State efforts to protect and conserve natural resources are accompanied by privately run protected areas whose contribution is becoming more and more important and which demonstrate concern on the part of society to take responsibility for conserving and protecting natural resources. Only Guatemala and Belize consider these private conservation initiatives to be a part of the national systems and only some are recognized, as is the case with the Refugios de Fauna Silvestre (Wild Animal Refuges) in Costa Rica. The principal reasons behind the establishment of private protected areas are varied and although the environmental motives are important, the significance of the boom in tourism and the business opportunities this generates should not be forgotten.

One of the advances to improve management is to apply a methodology developed by the Nature Conservancy (TNC) to evaluate how effectively protected areas are managed. This methodology allows the use of evidence and registers about the state of protected areas in such a way that they help guide their development. This evaluation is also very useful since in the majority of the region's countries there is no up-to-date centralized information source about the real status of their protected areas (PROARCA-APM, 2004,20).

Those results which have been disseminated and which can be consulted refer to the protected areas of Costa Rica. There are currently three reports from different years (1998, 2000 and 2006) and, with the exception of the first year, they have evaluated all the existing protected areas. There have also been reports on some areas in Guatemala and El Salvador. The remaining countries of the region are also fully involved in this process of evaluation but their results have still not been made public.

These reports show the precarious situation in the financial and management sectors of the protected areas in countries such as El Salvador, as well as stagnation and lack of

progress in the management of Costa Rica's protected areas. It also identifies those areas which are being well managed, such as Tikal in Guatemala, which is rated highly.

As can be seen in this article, the protection of natural resources in Central America has suffered from difficulties which have prevented it from achieving the required level of effectiveness. This situation is the result of weaknesses and shortages which revolve, as we have seen, around the respective governments' funding and management capabilities. These are essential factors for meeting the protected areas' conservation goals and are also key to ensuring that management is active and effective and that few preventative measures have to be taken.

This shortfall in planning and management has serious repercussions on the country's image as a tourist destination because in many cases the quality and experience which are promised to the tourist during promotion of the destination are not provided. The figures reveal a lack of adaptation and preparation in the protected areas' active and basic management and also in their so-called operative management, which incorporates measures for evaluating and monitoring the areas. Often it is impossible to know the full scope of this kind of management, the repercussions it may have or who visits protected areas because, for example, instruments such as studies or visitor counts have not been implemented, and there is no general monitoring of tourist activity.

On the basis of this notion of protected space as a joint project, the problems of planning, funding, using and managing protected spaces can be solved by social consensus and the intervention and involvement of all interested parties. The reality is that the region's public administrations do not have sufficient organizational or economic capabilities to adequately administer the conservation of the territory, for which reason it is necessary to continue looking for and working on new ways of governing and new instruments for the shared management of the territory. This would reinforce and increase the capacity to manage and conserve natural spaces.

It has been shown that there is interest in the region in sorting out the current state of these protected areas, and that the environment is a priority not just for politicians, but also for other members of society. The conservationists, the non-governmental organizations and the governments of the region are getting involved and collaborating in the conservation of natural resources, efforts which are being consolidated in many of the region's countries.